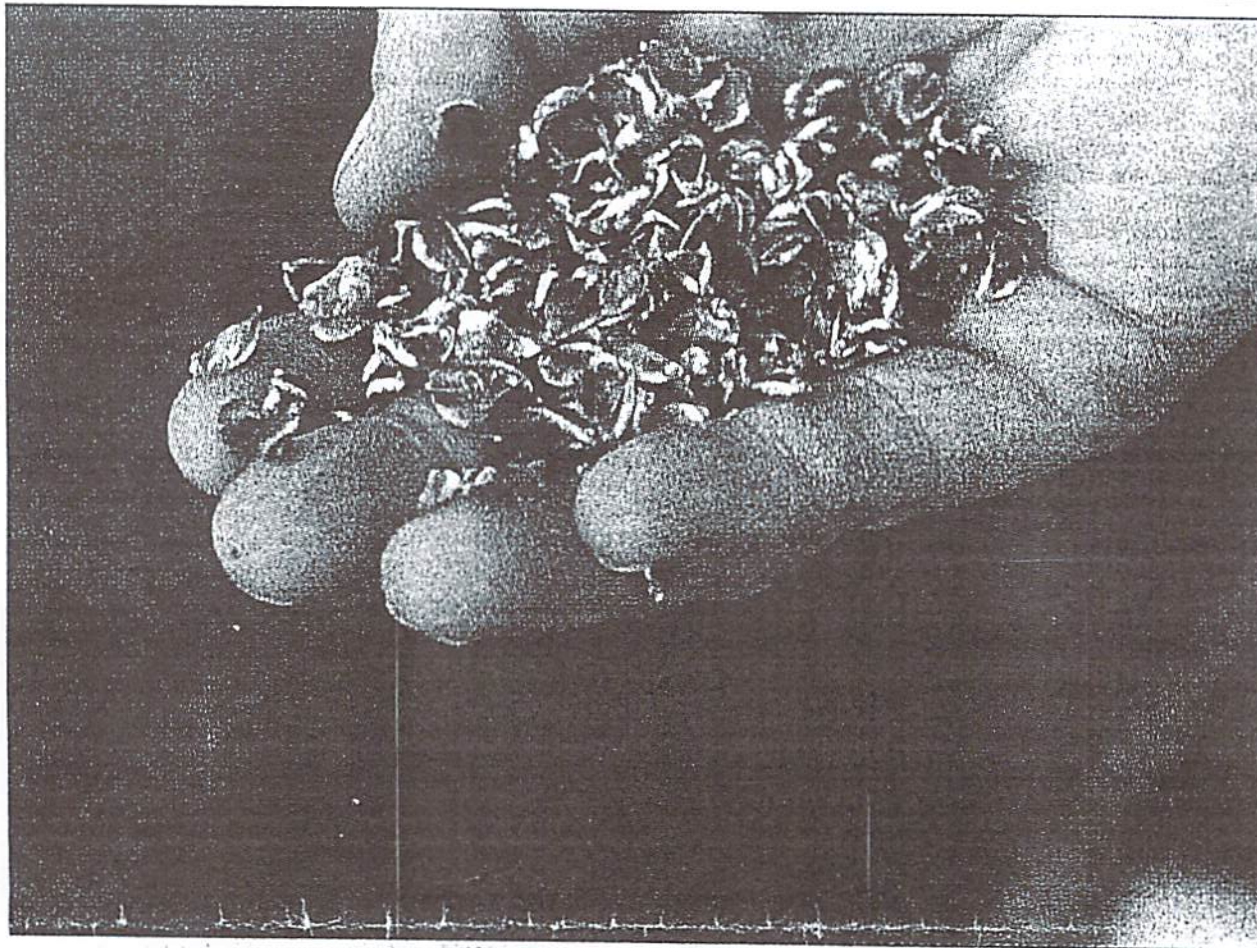


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Oyster seedlings are brought in from other locations. Oysters are not native to the area.

STAFF PHOTO/CHRIS SHORES

Pearl of the Bay

A look at Island Creek Oysters, and their farmers

A two part series on the oysters and their keepers

By Andria Farrell
ANFARREL@CNC.COM

Not since the cranberry has a product from Massachusetts made such a wave around the world. The highly sought after Island Creek Oysters have become a name in the restaurant business, and are a must have item locally. The 10 men that make up the Island Creek farming team are like mother hens taking care of their baby chicks.

The rough and rugged exterior of the oyster, often coated in a thick mud, is not exactly aesthetic, however, the slimy, yet delicious morsel that inhabits the hard protective shell is far more pleasing. Even though oysters are often shucked and served at black-tie affairs, the whole reason Island Creek Oysters owner Skip Bennett began his farming business was to avoid having to wear a suit and tie.

"I couldn't imagine getting a job," Bennett said about his reasons for starting the Island Creek Oyster business. "I have never had a résumé and no need for a suit."

"In two years the seeds will be ready, if I make a mistake with them in two years I won't have a pay check. That's farming."

Don Merry

The dress code for oyster farmers consists of waders, or water shoes and shorts, a shirt, if you prefer, and sun block in the summer – in the winter, warm, waterproof jackets, gloves, coats and hats, and waiters or galoshes.

Bennett started the business nearly 15 years ago, with the knowledge that Duxbury was the perfect place to grow an oyster - yet oysters are not native to Duxbury Bay. The water in the bay is too cold for the oysters to hatch, but fantastic to grow them in, Bennett said. The constant cool water temperatures prevent the oysters from spawning, but they allow them to continue to grow, and be harvested all year long.

Bennett began his venture after years of messing with clams. He knew that the water would be great for the oysters to grow; he just needed to get them to Duxbury. The oysters come from a hatchery in Maine. They get them as

seedlings and grow them to maturity. It takes two years for the oysters to reach maturity in the bay, Don Merry said.

Merry has three acres of space for his oysters. Each spot is a different stage in the oyster's life. From the underwater upwellers, to the sand bar where they are placed in mesh nutrient bags for growth and then finally where they are spread out in the shallow water for their last stage of maturity before harvest.

Oysters have not only paved the way for the agricultural community in Duxbury Bay, they also keep the waters clean and oxygen filled. Oysters naturally remove nitrogen from the waters, allowing for more oxygen-filled water that help prevent the growth of algae and keep sea life growing and clean. The millions of oysters that are harvested in the bay

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each year are not only providing a delicious treat, they are also keeping the ecosystem of the water clean and safe for the growth of natural plants, fish and other sea creatures.

Island Creek Oysters are also about giving back to the community that gives them space to grow their product. Every summer they hire local youth to work with them, and learn about oyster farming and aquaculture and work locally in the community. With the start of the Duxbury Oyster Festival last year they have developed another way to give back to the community through scholarships and donations. This year the oyster festival gave a \$1,000 scholarship to Ian Babson for his continued study in aquaculture. Babson is one of Merry's summer crewmembers, and has been working with him for three summers now. Island Creek Oysters also donated \$3,000 from the oyster festival to Crossroads for Kids, which has local ties with Camp Wing in Duxbury.

During the summer 60 children from the inner city come to Duxbury to learn about the water, aquaculture and enjoy the perks of ocean living. During their stay Merry, Bennett and other members of Island Creek Oysters spend time teaching the kids about oyster farming and aquaculture. Merry, who has been involved with Camp Wing for several years, is adamant about doing something every summer for the children at the camp. He believes in what they do, and anyway he can help he does.

"They have a terrific program, every year we try and teach something about what we do, it was natural for us to include them

in the oyster festival donation," he said.

Bennett said his business is based on trial and error. Each season is different. As they work they find things that are good, and things that are bad, and some things that they just can't help.

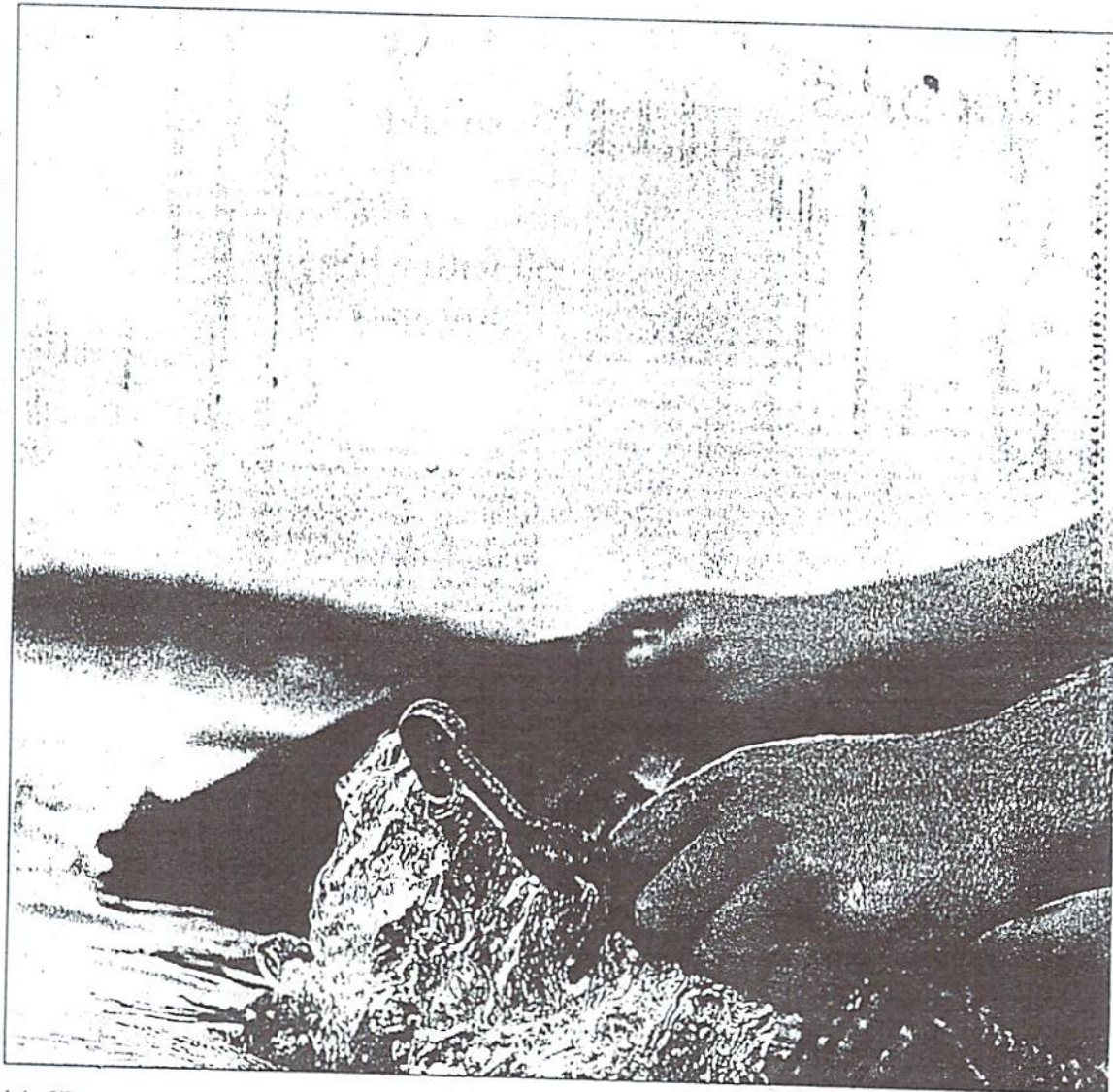
"I've spent a lot of time finding out what doesn't work," Bennett said.

Merry said that that this year they received the seedlings late, which they thought would turn out badly, but so far it has worked out. As long as they do their job every day, they should return a crop, but you never know. He has 1.5 million oysters ready for the next harvest, but one third of them will die he said. The new seedlings will be ready in two years; it is up to him and his crew to make sure they make it to maturity.

"In two years the seeds will be ready, if I make a mistake with them in two years I won't have a pay check," Merry said. "That's farming."

Like all farming, oyster farming is a gamble. Hurricanes, nor'easters, and illness are always a threat, "you just don't know, and you can't worry about it," Merry said. The cold waters that come through twice a day with the tides help Duxbury Bay, an ideal breeding place for oysters, and the cold waters help prevent illnesses in the oysters.

Because of the high demand of Island Creek Oysters in restaurants like the famous Per Se in New York, the oysters are harvested 52 weeks a year. "It's like your married now, you can't say no," Merry said about the relationship with the restaurants. Through the ice, the cold, the sun, the rain and the heat, the oysters business never stops. Well not in



Luke O'Day and Ian Babson straighten up the oyster boxes they use to grow the seedlings.

STAFF PHOTO/CHRIS SHORE

Duxbury that is.

Oysters are rugged and often full of mud, but inside they delicate and sweet. Perhaps the same could be said about the farmers that grow them. They work hard, often get dirty and smell like the sea, but when it comes down to it,

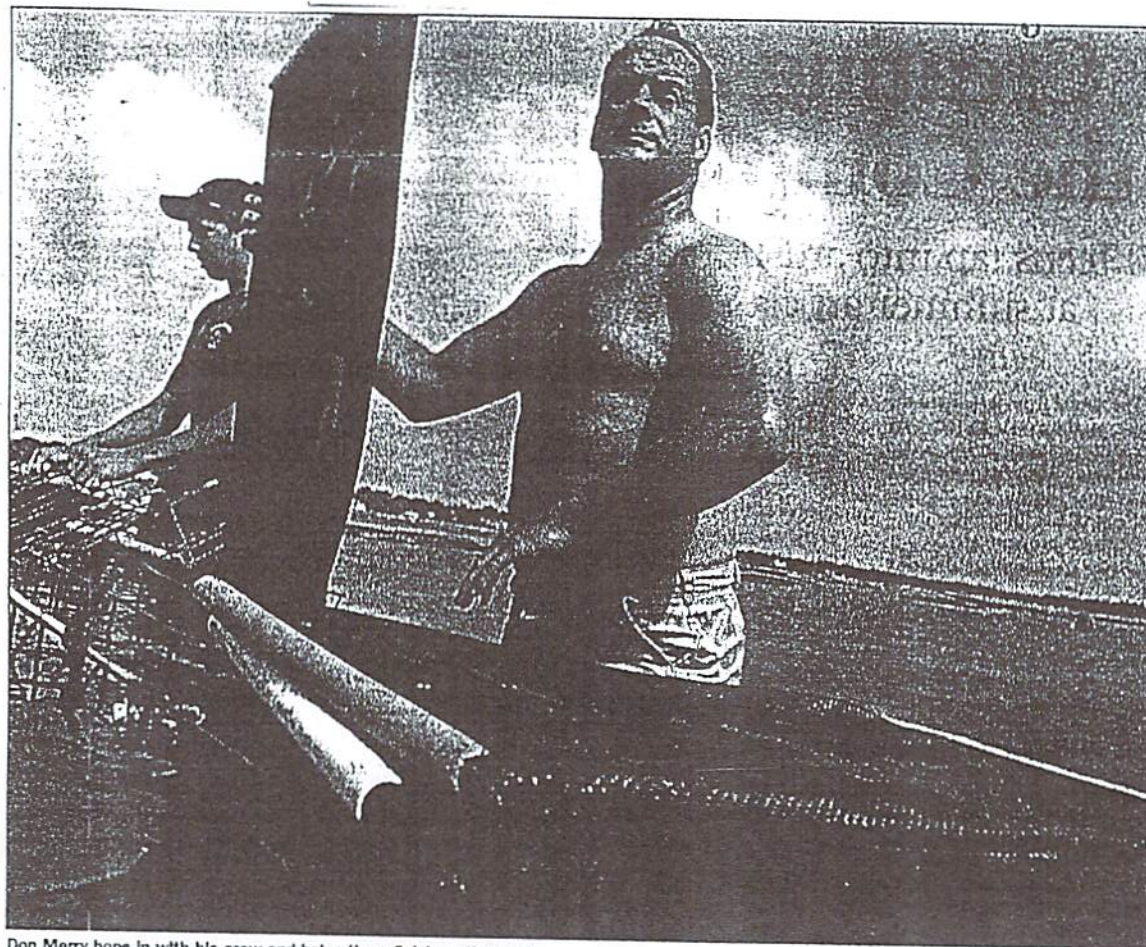
they care about every oyster they serve, and help in any way they can.

Island Creek Oysters may just be the pearl of Duxbury Bay!

Part 2 will be featured in next week's edition.



These oysters piled on the sandbar in Duxbury Bay.



Don Merry hops in with his crew and helps them finish up the work.



n Babson and Nick Johnson help spread out bags of oysters.